

A Time to Be Silent

Exodus 34:29-35; Luke 9:28-36

March 3, 2019

By Dr. David B. Freeman, Pastor
Weatherly Heights Baptist Church

Sometimes life shines upon us, doesn't it? We get good news. Everything's going our way. We are filled with joy. We sing. We shout. We may even get a little crazy and run around the sofa. Your child hits a homerun, and what do you do? Sit on your hands and do nothing? Of course not! You shout with excitement, right? You give high-fives and hugs. That's how you celebrate a homerun. Your granddaughter learns that she's been accepted into her first choice for college. What do you do? Since you're the grandparent and don't have to pay for it, you dance a jig with your granddaughter, of course! A young couple learns they are expecting their first child, and, you bet, they run around the sofa giddy with excitement. You finally pay off that thirty-year mortgage, and you're likely to shout for joy. Retirement day arrives and guess what? You're probably going to sing and go at least a little bit crazy. That's the way we respond to some of life's events.

But not all. Some good events elicit a different kind of response. I remember walking the Via Dolorosa in Old Jerusalem, the Way of Sorrows, the final walk of our Lord, culminating at the Church of the Holy Sepulcher, thought by millions to be the site of the crucifixion of Jesus. I didn't get loud or dance a jig that day. No high fives. It was a time for silence. I remember the first time I entered the nave of the Cathedral of St. John the Divine in New York City. It's one of the most awe-inspiring spaces I've ever entered. I didn't shout or jump. It was a time for silence. I remember first learning about the Christian conviction of Martin Luther King, Jr., the moral courage of Mahatma Gandhi, and the spiritual insight of the Desert Fathers and Mothers. My natural response was not to get loud or crazy; it was awe. Again it was a time for silence. Sometimes we are so overwhelmed by a sense of the Holy Other, the mystery and beauty of the divine, a sense of the Deep, that the most appropriate response is silence. Going crazy at a baseball game is fun, but standing in silent awe before the Unknowable One is profound.

That is Luke's unique contribution to the Transfiguration narrative. Matthew and Mark also record this event, but they record it a bit differently. Matthew says that Jesus "commanded" the disciples to tell no one of what had happened on the mountain. Mark says that Jesus "charged" them to tell no one of what they had just experienced. Not Luke. Luke gives us only these four words: "And they kept silent." No command. No charge. They knew it was a time to be silent.

Jesus took Peter, John, and James up onto a mountain. Some think it was Mt. Tabor just west of the Sea of Galilee. In the Bible, watch out for mountains. God was believed to dwell on the mountaintops, and epiphanies occurred there. Moses received the Ten Commandments atop Mt. Sinai. Elijah met God atop Mt. Horeb. It was that great scene where God passes before Elijah. And in the New Testament, Jesus gave some of his greatest teachings in the Sermon on the Mount. Mt. Tabor was such a place. Celtic Christians called them thin places, where heaven and earth met, where the veil between this world and the eternal world is thin, and we are likely to have encounters with the One beyond.

Watch now as that veil is briefly parted atop Mt. Tabor. Jesus and his three disciples were praying. Luke says that Jesus' appearance began to change. Matthew says that his face began to shine like the sun. His clothes became dazzling white. Suddenly two other men were with Jesus. Somehow Peter, John, and James knew, intuitively perhaps, that the two other men were Moses and Elijah, representing the Law of Moses and the prophets of Israel. Luke then says this: those three disciples "saw his glory." They saw the glory of Jesus as he stood there beside Moses and Elijah. What does Luke mean—they "saw his glory"?

This next part of the story is very important, and it's easy to miss. Peter, always the impulsive one, offered to build three "dwellings," one each for Jesus, Moses and Elijah. That word for "dwelling" is sometimes translated as "tents," "booths," or more accurately "tabernacles." The Feast of Tabernacles, one of the three most important feasts of the Jews, commemorated the time before the building of the Temple, when the presence of God was believed to dwell in a tent, a booth, a tabernacle, which could be moved from place to place. A tabernacle was the dwelling place of the Almighty.

They saw his glory. Do you see what's happening here? Peter offered to build a tabernacle for Jesus, a theological way of saying that *Jesus himself was becoming the tabernacle of God*, the new dwelling of the Almighty. The Law of Moses was present to confirm that. The prophets of Israel were present to confirm that. Jesus' face shone like the sun. His clothes dazzled white. And a voice from a cloud announced: "This is my Son, my Chosen; listen to him." They saw his glory that day at a thin place atop Mt Tabor.

When this ended, Peter, John, and James were left alone with Jesus, whom they now knew to be the tabernacle of God, the one in whom the presence of the Almighty dwelled most fully. That's what Luke meant. They saw his glory, and then suddenly the veil closed and it was all gone.

It wasn't a get loud and get crazy moment for them. No high fives. This wasn't a run around the sofa and dance a jig moment. Just four words: "And they kept silent." Because sometimes silence is the most appropriate response.

Most Baptist churches ignore Transfiguration. In some traditions, it is one of the most important days of the year, one of the five milestones in the life of Jesus: his Baptism, his Crucifixion, his Resurrection, the Ascension, and here Jesus' Transfiguration. Those who honor this event in the life of Jesus see on Mt. Tabor a thin place where human nature met God, the meeting place of the temporal and the divine, with Jesus himself as the connecting point. Theologically Jesus became the bridge between heaven and earth, and his face shone with the radiance of that experience. His clothes dazzled white. And his disciples knew it was a time for silence.

Have you had moments like that? Sometimes they are common. Think of eating an apple. Honeycrisp is my favorite. Think of all that goes into getting a Honeycrisp apple into your hands. Years ago somebody had to plant an apple tree and nurture it along until it became established. Somebody had to fertilize it, prune it, and spray it for bugs. Which means that somebody had to manufacture the fertilizer, build the pruning shears, and produce the bug spray. Then someone

had to do the backbreaking work of harvesting those apples. And when they got hurt, someone had to treat their injuries. Then someone had to crate the apples and deliver them to your supermarket. But someone had to build the truck that delivered the apples and train the truck's driver. On and on this chain reaction could go. Then that sweet girl at the checkout counter smiled and sold you an apple. Think of the millions of people who are involved in something as common as eating an apple. It's amazing, isn't it? It is awe-inspiring.

Now think about this. On a hill far away stood an old rugged cross. We call it an emblem of suffering and shame. On that old rugged cross the dearest and best for a world of lost sinners was slain. Mt. Calvary is a thin place. On that old rugged cross human nature met God, the temporal intersected the divine. On that old rugged cross, Jesus became the bridge between heaven and earth. A guard was present that day, a centurion, the gospels call him. He had a job to do. He had probably done it many times before. He didn't care about those men on the crosses; they were just three more criminals getting what they deserved. Until this: until that man on the center cross breathed his last breath and that thin veil in the temple was torn in two. Suddenly the guard realized who that man was and exclaimed, "Truly, this man was the Son of God!"

Silence. Because sometimes silence is the most appropriate response.

Closing Prayer

Today, Lord, we bow in humble silence, humbled by love that knew no bounds. May we in small and large ways share that love with the world around us. Amen.